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ABSTRACT

The objective of this study was to investigate social avoidance in Latina adolescents as a function of their ethnic identity status and gender role identity. Seventy-two Latina college freshmen completed measures of social anxiety and avoidance, gender role identity, and ethnic identity. Main effects of gender role identity and ethnic identity status emerged. Participants with androgynous gender role identities scored lower on both social anxiety and social avoidance than participants with undifferentiated, feminine, or masculine gender role identities. Also, achieved ethnic identity status and exploration ethnic identity status individuals scored lower on social anxiety and avoidance than their unexamined status counterparts. Findings are explained in terms of gender role identity and ethnic identity development as probable protective factors during adolescence. (Contains 24 references.) (Author/SM)

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The Influence of Ethnic Identity Status and Gender-Role Identity on Social Anxiety and Avoidance in Latina Adolescents

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Abstract

The objective of the present study was to investigate social avoidance in Latina adolescents as a function of their ethnic identity status and gender-role identity. 72 Latina college freshmen completed measures of social anxiety and avoidance, gender-role identity, and ethnic identity . Main effects of gender-role identity and ethnic identity status emerged. Participants with androgynous gender-role identities scored lower on both social anxiety and social avoidance than participants with undifferentiated, feminine, or masculine gender-role identities. Also, achieved ethnic identity status and exploration ethnic identity status individuals scored lower on social anxiety and avoidance than their unexamined status counterparts. Findings are explained in terms of gender-role identity and ethnic identity development as probable protective factors during adolescence.

Introduction

Our children's environments are becoming increasingly ethnically diverse as a result of increased bussing, social integration, and population shifts in urban areas (Gardner, 1996; Educational Research Service, 1995; Simon, 1995). As a result of this increasing diversity, it is important to understand factors which may influence students of diverse backgrounds. Most research is focused on European American students and may not be generalizable to ethnic minority students (Graham, 1992). To succeed in school, children and adolescents must interact successfully with peers and adults using socially appropriate skills. Ethnic minority students may be viewed as more socially anxious and avoidant than their European American counterparts (Jung, 1995; Skeen, 1974). However, this may be a result of the challenges that ethnic minorities face when interacting with peers in integrated settings (i.e. racism, discrimination) (Wakefield & Hudley, 1997; Gary, 1995; Hacker, 1992; Sigelman & Welch, 1991; Erkut, 1990). Therefore, one area that may be of

importance to investigate is possible factors that influence socially anxious and avoidant behavior since we know that this type of behavior is often related to low self-efficacy in social interactions, a tendency to make dispositional attributions for failures and depression (Innes & Thomas, 1989; Elliott, 1989). Factors that may influence socially anxious and avoidant behavior among ethnic minority students may be different from factors that influence this behavior among European American students.

During adolescence, individuals are engaged in identity development. Ethnic identity and gender-role identity are two aspects of such development for adolescents. Ethnic identity is particularly salient for ethnic minority adolescents. Ethnic identity status (unexamined, exploration, achieved) may be a useful construct for understanding how ethnic minority adolescents function in daily interactions with people at their schools, homes, and communities. These statuses are defined by the degree of an individual's examination of the

meaning and significance of her ethnic group membership (Phinney, 1992).

Achieved ethnic identity status has been consistently linked to positive outcomes of mental health and psychological adjustment (Phinney & Rotheram, 1987). Wakefield & Hudley (1997) found that achieved ethnic identity status adolescents who are the targets of racial discrimination are less likely to respond in a passive fashion with the perpetrator than their counterparts at exploration and unexamined ethnic identity status. Furthermore, as ethnic identity development progressed, they found that adolescents were less likely to respond passively to racial discrimination. One might then expect that passive responses mark an individual's tendency to engage in socially anxious and avoidant thoughts and behaviors. Therefore, one possible area of investigation is the relationship between ethnic identity status and level of social anxiety and avoidance.

Gender-role identity is also of crucial importance during adolescence. This is particularly true for females

because they experience increased pressure during this stage to conform to a feminine role and experience a narrowing of interests and aspirations (Dovan & Adelson, 1966; Hill & Lynch, 1982). An androgynous gender-role identity has been consistently linked with positive outcomes in females (Rose & Montemayor, 1994; Ramanaiah, Detwiler, & Byravan, 1995; Burchardt & Serbin, 1982). Gender-role identity has also been investigated in relation to socially anxious and avoidant behavior. Goodman & Kantor (1983) found that androgynous females had lower levels of social avoidance compared to females with a feminine gender-role identity. However, the vast majority of previous research in this area tends to focus on European American populations. Therefore, it is of interest to explore the role of gender-role identity among Latina adolescents and it's relation to socially anxious and avoidant behavior.

Hypotheses

- Participants with a balance of masculine and feminine traits (androgynous gender role identity) will have lower levels of social anxiety and avoidance compared to individuals with a masculine, feminine, or undifferentiated gender role identity.

- Participants who have explored the meaning and significance of their ethnic group membership (exploration & achieved ethnic identity status) will have lower levels of social avoidance compared to individuals who have an unexamined ethnic identity.

Method

Participants and Procedures

- 72 female Latina college freshmen attending a University in Southern California (Mean age $\underline{M}$ = 18.47)

- Participants completed 3 written questionnaires in their freshman writing composition course

Instruments

- The Social Avoidance and Distress Measure (SAD) (Watson & Friend, 1969) was used to assess social anxiety and avoidance. Respondents rated how much they agreed or disagreed with subjective and behavioral statements of social anxiety and avoidance. The SAD yields two separate scores for each respondent, one for social anxiety and one for social avoidance.

- The Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI) was used to assess gender-role identity. Respondents rated themselves on a variety of masculine and feminine characteristics on a 7 point likert scale. The BSRI yields a total masculine score and total feminine score for each respondent. Respondents are placed into one of four gender-role identity categories based on masculine and feminine scores: Androgynous, Masculine, Feminine, and Undifferentiated.

- Ethnic identity status was assessed using the 7-item achievement subscale of the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM) (Phinney, 1992). Respondents rated the degree to which they agreed or disagreed with statements concerning their ethnic group membership. The MEIM was adapted to categorize individuals into one of three ethnic identity statuses: Unexamined, Exploration, and Achieved.

Statements by Individuals at Different Ethnic Identity Statuses

UNEXAMINED

- "Why do I need to learn about who was the first black woman to do this or that? I'm just not too interested."
- "I don't go looking for my culture. I just go by what my parents say and do…"

EXPLORATION

- "I think people should know what black people had to go through to get where we are now."
- "I want to know what we do and how our culture is different from others."

ACHIEVED

- "People sometimes put me down because I'm black, but I don't care anymore. I can accept myself more."
- "I used to want to be just 'American',…but I don't want to be 'American' now. I'm happy being black."

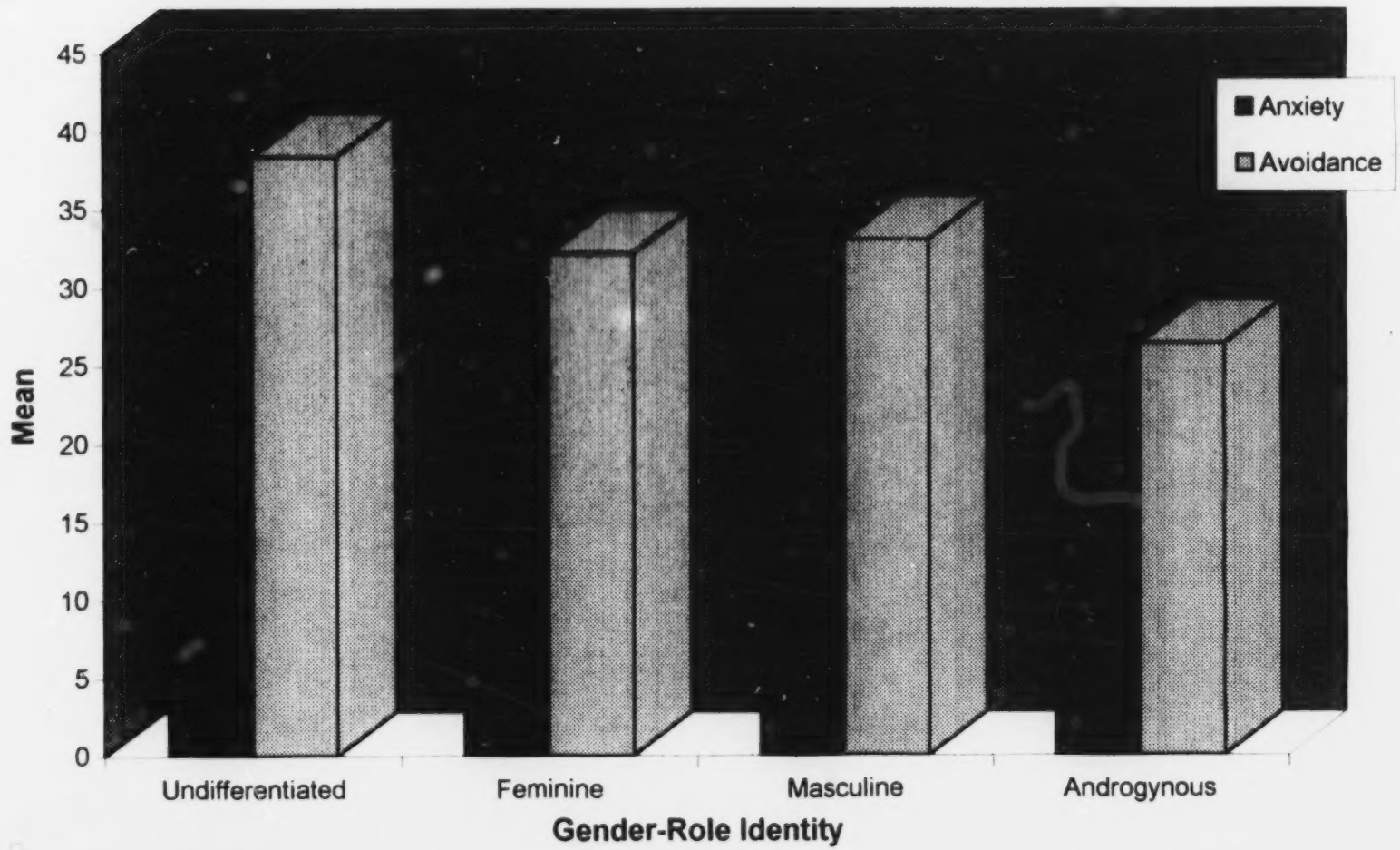
(Adapted from Phinney, 1989)

Results

- Social Anxiety and Avoidance levels differed across gender-role identity. Individuals with Androgynous Gender-Role Identity scored lower on social anxiety & avoidance than participants at any of the other 3 identities.
  ($\underline{F}[3, 62] = 4.74$, $\underline{p} < .01$)

- Social Anxiety and Avoidance levels differed across ethnic identity status. Individuals at exploration or achieved status scored lower on social anxiety & avoidance than their unexamined status counterparts.
  ($\underline{F}[2, 62] = 1.11$, $\underline{p} < .10$)

Social Anxiety & Avoidance Scores by Gender-Role Identity



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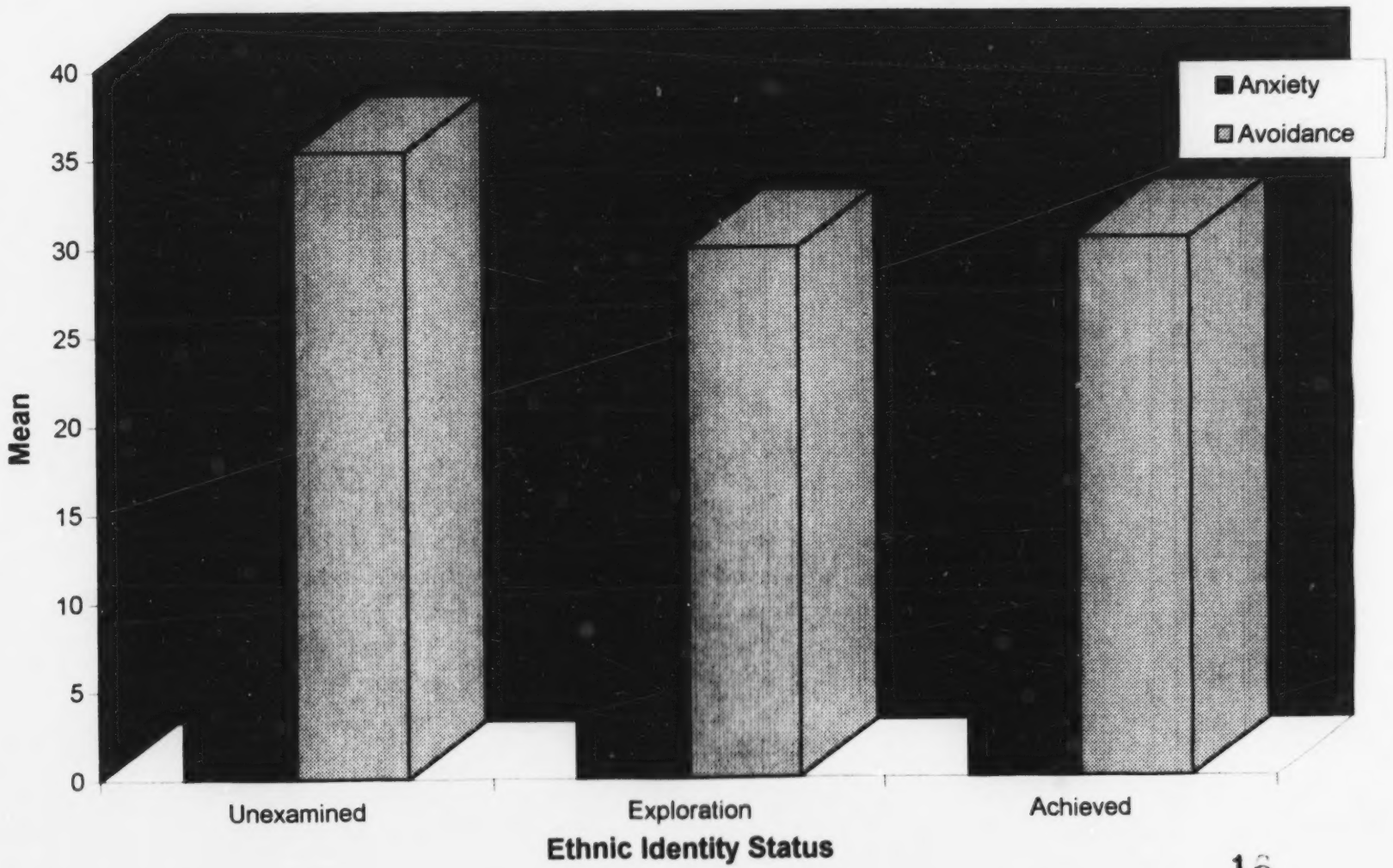
Social Anxiety & Avoidance Scores by Ethnic Identity Status



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Discussion

This study supports past research which has investigated social anxiety and avoidance in relation to gender-role identity and ethnic identity status. Gender-role identity, in particular, appears to have a strong relationship with social anxiety and avoidance for this sample. This study is of particular interest due to the population involved. Latina adolescents, rarely studied in this area of research, seem to benefit from an androgynous gender-role identity and either an achieved ethnic identity status or an exploration ethnic identity status in regards to social anxiety and avoidance.

In regards to gender-role identity, it is not surprising that androgynous female adolescents experience lower levels of social anxiety and avoidance than other female adolescents. Androgyny refers to a gender-role identity which encompasses both strong masculine and feminine identities. Since females who possess an androgynous gender-role identity have been found to experience positive outcomes in areas such as high perceived self-competence,

high life satisfaction, and low levels of depression, it is reasonable to assume that these individuals may also be less socially anxious and avoidant than other females. Also, certain characteristics which constitute an androgynous gender-role identity would seem to be negatively related to social anxiety and avoidance such as assertiveness and leadership.

Latinas who have explored the meaning and significance of their ethnic group membership may have a clearer understanding of the relevance of their ethnic group membership in their personal identities. These findings suggest that achieved and exploration ethnic identity status individuals may be highly cognizant of the history and current ethnic struggle for members of their ethnic group. Achieved and exploration ethnic identity status individuals may have reflected on the difficulties and issues with which parents, relatives, Latina/o and Chicana/o historical figures, civil rights activists, and other members of their ethnic group have struggled throughout their lives. These individuals are perhaps aware of the history of

discrimination against Latina/o and Chicana/o Americans in the United States; they may be aware that parents and older adults challenged discrimination during civil rights movements by actively responding to situations of oppression and exploitation. Thus, achieved and exploration ethnic identity status individuals may be less apt to be socially anxious and/or avoidant in situations they encounter.

In our communities, adolescents must interact with others frequently in order to be successful and it is easy to see how socially anxious and avoidant behavior may be detrimental. For adolescents, socially anxious and avoidant behavior can be especially harmful as they are becoming more a part of the world around them not only through school, but through work and community involvement as well. It is important to understand factors which may relate to social avoidance, which has been shown to be related to low self-efficacy in social interactions, a tendency to make dispositional attributions for failures, and depression (Innes & Thomas, 1989; Elliott, 1989). For adolescents, Latina

adolescents in particular, two such factors seem to be ethnic identity and gender-role identity. These findings demonstrate a need to encourage exploration of the meaning and significance of ethnic group membership and the exploration of gender-role characteristics. In our ever changing and increasingly diverse society, it is important to consider factors which may lead to more beneficial outcomes for all our children and to do what we can to ensure such outcomes.

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